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ABSTRACT

This article explores the process by which Western Muslim young adults develop the need to experience an ‘objective’ religious identity. We interviewed 20 Western Muslim young adults born in Montreal, Berlin, and Copenhagen within the age range of 18–25, exploring their religious identity development. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Thematic content analysis was used to explore patterns in their narratives. The participants disliked the perceived ethnocentric Muslim identity of their parents, which they sought to ‘purify’ for themselves from ‘cultural contamination’. There were two important elements underlying their process of religious identity objectification: experience of anti-Muslim political discourse and exposure to religious diversity in the aftermath of deterritorialisation.

KEYWORDS

Western Muslims; identity development; religious identity; Islamophobia; objectification

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Introduction

The population of Western Muslims is increasing rapidly and is expected to grow by almost a third in Europe over the next 20 years (Grim and Karim 2011, 14). A significant portion of this population increasingly consists of migrant descendants (Grim and Karim 2011, 38). Little is known, however, how Western Muslim develop their identities amidst intensifying Islamophobia, although identity development is understood to be particularly affected by social and political forces (Meer 2008). Western media often associate Islam with violence and portray Muslims as potential security threats (Alsultany 2012; Bankoff 2003; Rousseau and Jamil 2008; Shaheen 2003). Furthermore, Western governmental policies have singled out Muslim populations in response to the looming threat of radicalisation, thereby marginalising them in the process (Afshar 2013; Abbas 2007). The risk of radicalisation is articulated along theological and psychological lines, with Muslim adolescents and young adults being perceived to be drawn into extremism as a function of personal vulnerabilities (e.g. identity confusion) and socialisation, as a result of which they develop a narrow-minded outlook on Islam (Kundnani 2014). Research suggests, however, that radicalisation theories

dismiss the importance of socio-political contexts (Coppock and McGovern 2014, 246).

There is thus a need to understand the religious identity development of Western Muslims in relation to their socio-political contexts. This article explores how the deterritorialisation of Islam and increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric are both integral to the process of Muslim identity objectification, where Muslim identity is sought to be experienced as 'objective'. The need for an 'objective' Muslim identity insists upon a 'pure' understanding of Islam that is seemingly intolerant of diversity in religious practice. This may resemble the sort of narrow-mindedness one might expect in a discussion on radicalisation. Thus, there is a demand for research to unpack the perceived need for an objective Muslim identity.

The objectification of the Muslim identity

The 'Muslim' category remains elusive in research. It confounds intra-religious differences, ethnicity, and race in a virtually indistinguishable mass (Brubaker 2013; Grillo 2004). Inconsistent integration policies confound the Muslim category even further. Whereas, previously, immigrants were defined by their national or ethnic origins in European countries, these same populations are now increasingly identified in religious terms (Brubaker 2013, 2). As a consequence, the Muslim category is obscured by ethnic and racial connotations in Western countries, although it is often discussed in exclusively religious terminology.

Furthermore, modernising and secularising forces have shaped migrant Muslim communities in Western countries, of which two will be mentioned here (Roy 2004). The first is the deterritorialisation of Islam, where Islam is no longer endemic within a political context, but rather consists of many cultures within a secular state. Islam in the Western context involves a transformation of status: from cultural hegemony (in Muslim-majority countries) to minority religion. The latter's constitution is particularly marked by the absence of cultural or political coercion to perceive Islam in one particular manner. The second consists of the unlinking of ethnicity and Islam upon migration, whereby religious elements become salient and enter consciousness (Eickelman and Piscatori 2004, 38). Ethnic identity here denotes a sense of belongingness based on shared commonality (in the case of this article, heritage) as well as an *a priori* group categorisation reproduced externally through political discourse (Jenkins 2014). Here, the thought of the Muslim community, the *ummah*, grows from a localised community with national boundaries to an imagined community spanning all regions and cultures (Anderson 2006; Roy 2004).

The two processes mentioned above culminate in the 'objectification' of Islam as it pertains to the development of the Western Muslim identity.[1] The objectification of Islam is defined as a process whereby religion is perceived to be a global entity, free from cultural contamination, which must be practised in a definitively singular manner (Rothenberg 2011, 359). The objectification of Islam

is therefore at odds with a perception of religion that is dynamic and shaped by local processes and interpretations. Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori (2004, 38) introduce objectification as a process by which basic questions come to the fore in the heightened consciousness of believers. Modern forms of mass media and education have given rise to this process, in which religious elements of social and political life are made available for negotiation. In Western contexts, however, this process occurs primarily as a function of Islam's minority status. With traditions now salient and open for discussion, Western Muslims may contest what they perceive as cultural discrepancies with 'real Islam' and thus appeal to the Muslim identity as a means of differentiating their Islam from ethnocentric religiosity. Furthermore, exposure to religious diversity also contributes to the objectification process. With the advent of the internet, sites such as YouTube increasingly expose Muslims to the variability in religious identity expressions (Svensson 2013). Finally, the process of Islam's objectification is intensified by controversies (e.g. 'Islam is violent') surrounding the religion in public discourse. According to Olivier Roy (2004, 145), Muslims feel the need to engage these controversies with irrefutable exonerations established on perceived truths that are free from cultural deviation. The study of objectification thus examines the social and political prerequisites which give rise to an explicit consciousness of the 'Muslim identity' in relation to cultural traditions, while taking into consideration the reflexive boundaries within which an objective Muslim identity can be expressed in a given context (Tambar 2012).

The perceived need of distilling 'pure knowledge' from distorted beliefs is not new. Indeed, it was the scientific project of the enlightenment (Zaidi 2007, 413). The process of objectification can be seen across religions and non-religion, following the same Western philosophical orientation of self-actualisation established on the need for certainty. The experience of certainty is, above all else, psychologically reassuring in a world which is increasingly fraught with economic and political uncertainties (Hirsh, Mar, and Peterson 2012, pg.314; Bauman 2007). Psychologists even argue that the intolerance of uncertainty is at the heart of anxiety (Carleton 2014, pg. 943). For Western Muslims, the objectification of religion is a product of individualisation that gives primacy to experience in the face of uncertainty. Objectification is thus conducive to the range of Muslim identities we observe today—from liberal to fundamentalist (Roy 2004, 25).

An individual's perceived need for objectivity should not be understood as being dependent on actual knowledge. Rather, it is predicated on the *experience* that one's Islam is 'pure' and free of cultural impurities—therefore 'objective'. In other words, the epistemological question of what constitutes 'objective knowledge' is circumvented with the *feeling* of objectivity. Individuals generally view their ethical beliefs as personally objective and unaffected by social conventions, especially when grounded in a religious framework (Goodwin and Darley 2008, pg.1341). According to Roy (2004, 38), born-again religious individuals (those with a renewed interest in faith) are in search of a

religiosity founded on the *experience* of truth, with directives that can be instantly understood and followed. Syed Ali (2005, pg.522) relates how, in the process of their spiritual development, American Muslim women, for example, sought an understanding of Islam that was perceived to be free from cultural prejudice and experientially 'objective'.

Developing an objective religious identity

The Western Muslim identity is thus global in scale, disassociated from its historic origins and at times unrelated to actual religiosity (Roy 2004). Moreover, it subsumes elements of religion, race, gender, and culture, which Muslims must navigate in their religious identity development. Social psychological research finds that the Muslim identity of adolescents evolves as they begin to assert their independence (Mullikin 2006; Peek 2005, pg. 226). Extrapolating from the process, Lori Peek (2005) found the religious identity of young Muslims typically falling within three categories of development: *ascribed, chosen*, and *declared*. Ascribed identity relates to youth who pay little attention to the Muslim identity inherited from their parents. The identity is considered chosen when young people embark on a journey of introspection and overcome the taken-for-grantedness of their identity. Muslim youth are in the final stage of their identity development when they declare it to others despite—and often in response to—collective threat. While Peek offers a basic framework of the way in which Muslim identity develops, social identities are also understood to be produced

and transformed according to a variety of different social and political processes (Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002, 290). Thus, by superimposing the theoretical framework developed by Peek (2005) upon the process of objectification illustrated by Roy (2004), our research sets out to explore how Western Muslim young adults develop their religious identity from ascribed to chosen in the light of wider political contexts. We found that some participants indicated a significant anti-ethnic attitude towards the Muslim identity of their parents, deferring their religious development to that of peers and other sources. Underlying this process was a persistent need to experience Muslim identity as objective.

Methodology

The data for this article were taken from a larger research corpus exploring the social identity development of Western-born Muslim young adults in Montreal, Berlin, and Copenhagen. The cities were chosen because of the primary author's intimate familiarity with their respective Muslim communities. For this study, we explored the narratives of 20 second-generation Muslims within the age range of 18–25. Eight participants were interviewed in Berlin, Germany, nine in Copenhagen, and three in Montreal, Canada. We introduced the research project to prospective participants as a holistic exploration of their identity development, without reference to discrimination or radicalisation discourses. The Montreal participants were recruited using a snowball method and flyers posted within

student associations in high schools, colleges, and universities around the Montreal area. The Berlin participants were recruited from a weekly gathering at a mosque. The Copenhagen participants were recruited by word of mouth. Interested individuals were explained the nature of the study, its purpose, its duration as well as its potential consequences. Considering the elusive categorisation of 'Muslim' in Western contexts, the only criterion of entry for prospective participants was the self-identification of 'Muslim', irrespective of personal definition. A Western Muslim, for our research purposes, was a self-identifying Muslim individual born in a Western country.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours. The primary author conducted interviews in English, French and German, while a translator was approved by Danish participants to join for on-site Danish-English translation. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, given the qualitative nature of the research. We promoted a non-threatening two-way dialogue to solicit an organic narrative detailing the social identities of the participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed with an open-ended format. Interviews always began with the question 'What is your identity?'. Various social identities were then addressed in the interview, focusing primarily on religious, national, and ethnic affiliations. In their narratives, participants were asked to describe how they perceived the development of each social identity, with a discussion of the significance of the social environment if it arose. Follow-up questions such as 'How have you come to understand your Muslim identity

in such a way?' provoked further discussions on the process of identity development. Interviews were transcribed, analysed, and coded for individual themes.

Qualitative analysis strategy

Given the qualitative nature of this research, a thematic content analysis was used to discover patterns within the narratives (Braun and Clarke 2006). A contextualised approach was employed to address both the meanings individuals extrapolated from their experiences as well as the socio-political contexts which formulate the boundaries in which meaning can be constructed. After providing a rich description of the dataset, thematic patterns—both related and unrelated to our research objectives—were explored. Our analysis primarily emphasised themes relating to the impact of parents and peers on social identity development. Two researchers coding separately found a high degree of consistency in the extrapolated themes. Themes were then categorised and linked to the overall research objectives and a mind map was developed connecting themes to particular social contexts. The primary author selected several key themes pertinent to the discussion of religious identity development.

From family to friends: choosing the Muslim identity

The participants related a variety of different inspirations in the development of their Muslim identity. Many related the importance of their family's involvement

which persisted well into their young adulthood. This article, however, focuses on the Muslim young adults who shared a gradual detachment from family concerning matters of religion. The stories of their religious development often began at a young age. Although their parents provided them with the basic education of what constitutes a Muslim identity when they were young, the importance of family diminished over time. Eventually, they embarked on a quest for religiosity outside the family home. Reiterating the findings of Peek (2005), we found that, although parents provide the fundaments of religious identity development, the association with parents slowly dwindles over the course of adolescence, making way for personal exploration and peer relations. This trend underscores an understanding in which religious identity is thought to be inherited with the cultural baggage of the parents, which these young Muslims would attempt to purify through a process of objectification.

Parents and cultural traditions

The participants often described their ethnic identity along hereditary, racial, and linguistic lines. For them, the ethnic identity is a political category with racial connotations superimposed upon their person—not a choice of group affiliation. One of the participants (all names are pseudonyms) summarised this sentiment succinctly: 'I can't run away from being Pakistani' (July 22nd, 2012, Copenhagen). For Hassan, his ethnic identity was omnipresent due to its racialised nature and therefore inescapable, not just because of the colour of his skin, but by virtue

others categorising him as Pakistani. Most participants would agree with Hassan, stating that they had no qualms about their ethnic identities *per se*, they only had when it confounded religious practices. They argued that one should leave the ethnic identity as a linguistic and racial category to clarify the distinction between ethnicity and religion. Hassan described how his growing a beard for religious purposes, for example, put him at odds with his family when he started taking his faith more seriously: "I can't say I had a strong Muslim identity, but I knew Islam was right. My parents however were saying when I started growing a beard that I was becoming too extreme" (July 22nd, 2012, Copenhagen). Hassan revealed the point when his religious identity became detached from family traditions, as exemplified by his choice to grow a beard. In many cases, such as in Hassan's, this was precipitated by a group of religious peers who demonstrated a form of Islamic practice that differed from that found at home. Sonia, born in Copenhagen to a Romanian mother and a Syrian father, shared similar thoughts:

> And that's a problem I've been aware of since my teenage years, that lots of Arabs consider themselves the 'right' Muslims because they have the Arabic background. Of course, the Qur'an is revealed in the Arabic language and Arabic is important. But that doesn't mean [that] if you're not Arab, you're not Muslim. So that's why, thinking a little more about that fact, the Qur'an should be the starting point, and not your ethnic background. (July 15th, 2012, Copenhagen)

Discussing her Muslim identity, Sonia spontaneously insisted that a Muslim is not an Arab. This exclamation was crucial to her understanding of what constitutes the Muslim identity, which had been an important point of

contention since her adolescence. Sonia underscored the triviality of ethnic background in relation to the Qur'an, which she considered to be the only true measuring stick of the Muslim identity. Doing so, she challenged the perceived nationalism and ethnocentrism pervasive in Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, Sonia later shared her dismay about the ethnic divisions in mosques in Denmark—which she believed fragmented the Muslim *ummah*—and deliberately developed her Muslim identity as non-ethnic in response.

Rima, born in Berlin to Palestinian parents, was especially concerned with the way her family confused cultural traditions with religious practices, "because certain traditions don't coincide with my religion, like when it comes to marriage, that's not completely correct or congruent with Islam" (June 2nd, 2012). Rima related that marriage was embedded in her family with great religious significance, yet was endorsed in a manner she felt was incongruent with her Muslim identity. Family traditions were thus depicted as antithetical to an objective Islam. Rima in turn asserted her agency and challenged her family's demands, basing herself upon a platform which affirmed that her understanding of Islam was closer to the truth. Zeinab, born in Copenhagen to Iraqi parents, echoed these thoughts:

> As I said that our parents had their mistakes [in the practices of their Islamic faith]. But it is interesting to find out what kind of mistakes our parents had made regarding the Muslim identity and then not follow copy them—developing ourselves to be something better. It's not like I'm criticising my parents completely. Of course, they had influenced me, but there's always room for development and improvement. (July 17th, 2012, Berlin)

Zeinab highlights a prevalent attitude among Muslim young adults. Of note is that the parents were mistaken in their religious practice, while Zeinab, with access to religious knowledge online, believed that she was closer to the truth. The perceived need for objectivity is clear; whether Zeinab was indeed following a more truthful understanding of Islam, or whether that even existed, was irrelevant. The experience of objectivity was the only thing that mattered and Zeinab's parents were unnecessary in that pursuit. Yousef, born in Berlin to a half-German, half-Lebanese mother and an Egyptian father, shared Zeinab's attitude and related that cultural traditions at home were upheld with a misplaced sense of patriotism:

> I grew up in a I would say nationalistic household, where my dad had a strong emphasis on being all patriotic about Egypt. I sort of distanced myself from that because, though I do have strong feelings towards being Arab, but not [towards] being Egyptian or Lebanese or any other country. I would say that the Islamic feeling towards the Muslim community is greater than towards any one nation. (June 6th, 2012, Berlin)

For Yousef, ethnicity was exacerbated by nationalism, which he believed was profoundly divisive within the larger Muslim community. Rather, he believed in the potential to envision a new global understanding of the Muslim community with others who share the same outrage towards nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Friends and objectivity

The importance accorded to a perceived objective Muslim identity underscores the disconnect in relations between friends and family. It appears that some young Muslim adults develop their religious Muslim identity in opposition to the practices of their immigrant parents. They turn instead to friends who share their religious motivations, embedded within an environment of belongingness and commitment. Indeed, most of the participants underscored that their peers were essential in the process of learning their faith. Muslim youth are found to differentiate increasingly their faith from their families' cultural practices with the help of peers (Zimmerman 2015, pg. 56 Peek 2005, pg. 229). Whereas the Islam of peers represented an effort towards shaping a perceived objective Muslim identity, the Islam of parents was often depicted as one of cultural tradition and custom. Danial, a participant born in Copenhagen to Albanian parents, demonstrated this distinction clearly:

> Basically, it's a difficult question to answer because it's abstract. When I was younger I got a lot of impressions of what a Muslim is and they were all very different, but I was too young to choose which one was right. But with time, you meet with people who are more knowledgeable than you, who spark your interest in what Islam really is. In the end, obviously, the way Islam is practised at home is different from the ways it is practised among friends. (July 22nd, 2013, Copenhagen)

Danial pointed out how varied Muslim identities were when he was growing up, later finding solid ground among knowledgeable friends who led him in what he perceived to be the right direction. He was critical towards his parents' religious practices which he thought were rooted in ethnic heritage rather than

knowledge. Participants like Danial insisted that their friends were vital for them acquiring theological knowledge, either directly through social emulation or indirectly by them providing opportunities to attend Islamic classes together. Theological knowledge was thus the criterion separating cultural traditions from perceived objectivity. Indeed, many participants suggested that sound theological knowledge—as established upon the Qur'an and objective prophetic traditions—was central to the growth of a Muslim identity. Thus, they contrasted the Muslim identity with their national and ethnic identities which they perceived as ephemeral and therefore prone to change according to time and place. In other words, theological knowledge was ultimately perceived as the vehicle driving the individual towards perceived objectivity. Discussing the knowledge needed to develop the Muslim identity, Sonia described that

> the feeling of one being a Muslim without thinking about all the other stuff [relating to the pillars of Islam], for me, the person doesn't or hasn't acquired enough knowledge about what it is to be a Muslim. (July 13th, 2012, Copenhagen)

Sonia argued that those who ascribed to themselves the Muslim identity, without insight of what Islam entailed, were deficient in their religiosity. Once more, it was not the actual knowledge of Islam that was important, but the process of learning that provoked the experience of objectivity.

Ferina, born in Montreal to Pakistani parents, related that she eventually looked beyond the family context to acquire a 'proper' understanding of Islam:

> I think it was from home; I was taught from a young age, pretty much.

> But to understand the foundation of Islam properly, that was not from home. That was mostly institutions, so basically Islamic classes. And even doing my own research, to really understanding what Islam means. (September 27th, 2012, Montreal)

For Ferina, Islamic classes underscored the significance of personal choice in the development of the Muslim identity. She enacted her agency in deciding the terms of her theological education and—perhaps more importantly—the Muslim social environment outside the family context. The emphasis on choice was intrinsic to Ferina's Muslim identity development but grew in relation with her social environment. Thus the perceived need for an objective Muslim identity entailed a choice: to look outside the family home towards other venues that may satisfy the need. In doing so, Ferina constructed a social environment with others who shared the perceived need for objectivity, thereby reifying it as integral in her Muslim identity development. Salam, born in Berlin to Syrian parents, spoke highly of her friends in this regard:

> When I think about my friends, all my friends are practising Muslims. I don't feel like I'm in a Christian country, because I go to pray after breaking my fast and I really feel like I'm in a Muslim land, because there are so many Muslims and there are so many blessings. (June 14th, 2012, Berlin)

Salam affirms that her friends established the fundament of her Muslim identity. Significantly, she related that her friends provided the feeling of living in a 'Muslim land' without borders. Salam thus shared the fantasy of an ideal

community established upon a collective of practising Muslims, with implicit non-ethnic, non-nationalistic foundations. Hassan, whom we introduced earlier, shared Salam's feelings of how essential his Muslim peers were for his religious development:

> [My friend and I] weren't praying, but I was interested. We began to pray and I only hung out with him. Just me and him; my other friends were drinking and partying and things like that. Then I started making new friends from Hizb ul-Tahrir [a pan-Islamic political organisation which seeks the reestablishment of the Caliphate, it is not banned in Denmark]. They were doing good work but I didn't think it was the right approach, the closest to the prophetic traditions. I had a cousin who followed the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions and he pushed me towards that direction instead. (July 22nd, 2012, Copenhagen)

Hassan's narrative is both the coming-of-age tale of his religious identity and an illustration of Copenhagen's various Muslim groups. For Hassan, his religious identity development entailed the formation and erosion of several circles of Muslim friends. Both his friend and his cousin, whom Hassan described as being very close to him, played key roles in his story. Hassan said that he navigated through a variety of Muslim groups located in Copenhagen, cross-examining their beliefs with what he perceived to be 'the right approach' to Islam. When questioned what his barometer was for judging which group was 'right', Hassan related the centrality of his cousin's authority in this respect. Objectivity in this case is not the product of any formal epistemological investigation; Hassan disassociated with Hizb ul-Tahrir because, in accordance with his cousin's counsel, he simply did not experience their Islam as 'objective' (but rather

'subject' to social and political forces). Thus, when he embarked on his own journey of developing his Muslim identity from ascribed to chosen, Hassan carefully navigated the social landscape in a manner which implicitly affirmed his cousin's understanding of Islam. This understanding was the reference point of Hassan's 'objective' experiences.

Why the need for an objective Muslim identity?

The emphasis on objectivity is not surprising. As we outlined in the introduction, the objectification of the Muslim identity appears to be an artefact of the Western socio-political context (Roy 2004, pg.52). In this section, we extrapolate several distinct elements outlining the process of objectification in religious identity development. Firstly, Western Muslim youth are found to develop an emerging religious identity in response to the negativity surrounding Islam in the media (Modood 2007, 181). Unsurprisingly, most of the participants felt that the vilification of Islam necessitated an immediate and appropriate response. For these young adults, refuting the media's misrepresentation of 'real Muslims' is as important as defining what a Muslim really is. Such apologetics, however, necessitated a platform of objectivity. Thus, negative portrayals of Islam appeared to drive young Muslim adults towards exploring and subsequently affirming the image of a 'true Muslim'. Shaimaa, born in Berlin to Palestinian parents, explained:

> In fact, I occupied myself with Islam only because the media said that

> Islam oppresses women. I didn't know; I had never opened the Qur'an before. But I felt something was wrong. So, I went to the library, found the Qur'an, and read it. And I was shocked to see all the good that was in it. I just researched things myself and I found out what the truth was and it clearly conflicts with the media. I don't think that the media ever read the Qur'an. (June 10th, 2012, Berlin)

Shaimaa revealed that the German media's portrayal of Muslim women prompted her interest in Islam. Previously having an ascribed identity inherited from her parents, Shaimaa began to immerse herself in theological research. An effective protest against the media's portrayal of Muslim women, she argued, necessitated a platform of knowledge that was irrefutable. From that point onwards, Shaimaa's religious identity development demanded a perceived objective understanding of Islam. Rima, who was mentioned earlier, also related that her class mates' critical remarks about Muslims drove her towards research:

> I went to that school and they were all German and you often get into discussions, which always motivated me to learn more about Islam because I needed arguments to talk with them and that's why I engaged myself with specific themes in Islam, which are controversial in the media, which everyone used to be talking about or which we would talk about in class, for example. So, I had to engage myself with these themes more and it just became background knowledge, so when I engaged with it, everything went together. (June 2nd, 2012, Berlin)

Rima's story illustrates that political realities are translated in the lives of these young Muslim adults as they navigate Islamophobia in everyday contexts. Like Shaimaa, the Muslim identity developed from ascribed to chosen in high school, where mockery of Islam established the need for iron-clad refutations. The

personal need for a perceived objective understanding of Islam, either through personal research or peers, thus became an implicit foundation upon which Rima's Muslim identity developed. Asma, born to Pakistani parents in Montreal, spoke of the importance of having an objective understanding of Islam:

> It's based on knowledge you've gained through personal experience. There was a big controversy over the mosque in Pakistan of training young kids to fight in *jihad* and what not. They took advantage of minors who did not know much but if you study the conditions, the families, a lot of them were poor, their personal experiences, the way they've been growing up in poverty. It was those personal experiences that led them to, you know … for someone to punch someone in the name of Islam, the reason why it's easy for him to do that is because of personal experience, which is leading their Islam in the first place. I wouldn't even say it's Islam. (October 3rd, 2012, Montreal)

While discussing Islam's portrayal in the media, Asma diverted the subject to share her thoughts on extremism and how terrorist groups developed in South Asia: it was the result of ignorance due to economic, cultural, and political circumstances. For Asma, those taking advantage of others as well as those being taken advantage of were both victims of their cultural experiences informing their Muslim identity. A more objective understanding of Islam, she argued, was protective; if Muslims only had a real understanding of Islam, personal experiences, cultural traditions, and political circumstances would not produce the type of Muslim terrorists portrayed in the news. For Shaimaa, Rima, and Asma, the perceived objectivity needed to defend Islam was not to be found at home where family traditions were products of ethnic customs. Instead, as described in the previous sections, these young women ventured outside the

family context to seek knowledge and companionship in a shared need for a perceived objective Muslim identity. For them, this was the only way to defend Islam from public distortion.

Secondly, the Western Muslim community consists of many communities from various national and ethnic backgrounds. The experience of religious diversity compels Western Muslims to purify their religious identity from cultural impurities (Roy 2004, pg.70). The participants challenged the cultural practices of local mosques as well as the cultural practices of distant countries such as Saudi Arabia. In challenging tradition, their need for establishing an objective Muslim identity became significant. Some participants thus had a profoundly anti-ethnocentric attitude, often taking harsh stances towards cultural Muslims who subscribe to Islam in name but not in practice. Zeinab shared her logic in dismissing cultural traditions:

> I think the main issue I'm finding is that, in Islam, rules never change across time and space, but culture and traditions do change with time. What used to be pure Iraqi [culture] 15 years ago may not be what it is today, it's shifting; the traditions are changing. So, these are shifting cultural identities. When it comes to religion, it's not shifting. (July 17th, 2012, Berlin)

Zeinab asserted that the Muslim identity should be static, from a theological standpoint, in an ever-changing landscape of national and ethnic identities. Thus, when discussing her Iraqi identity, Zeinab related its insignificance in relation to her Muslim identity. According to her, an objective Muslim identity is the basis upon which other social identities are established. Participants such as Zeinab

also criticised the foundations of other cultural identities, both national or ethnic, given their ephemeral nature—these identities lacked the perceived timeless quality of Islamic traditions. Furthermore, they asserted that, if a social identity was prone to change, it would change according to the whims of society. Ethnic and national identities were just reflections of a society's current *Zeitgeist*.

Danial and Hassan, who were both introduced in the previous section, championed a perceived objective understanding of the Muslim identity, by which, they argued, many Western Muslims did not abide. For Danial, it appears that his perceived objectivity of Islam served as a means of differentiating himself first and foremost from 'Westernised Muslims' who simply follow the cultural trends of society. To establish certainty amidst cultural impurities, Danial argued for the necessity for Muslims to experience an 'objective' Muslim identity. Hassan shared many of Danial's thoughts:

> I would say the cultural Muslims are more focused on the worldly life. They forget that there's an afterlife. They're thinking about how to make money and get a good job. And I don't see that as a priority. For someone to make my mom happy, you need a big career, a big job, etc., to be successful in this worldly life. (July 22nd, 2012, Copenhagen)

Hassan states that his religious development can be at odds with his parents' expectations of him. Raised in a Pakistani household with an ascribed Muslim identity, Hassan experienced the need to differentiate between cultural and 'pure' Islamic teachings during adolescence. Similar to Danial's case, the tension between culture and religion also extended to Western-born Muslims, which

explains why many have fallen prey to the habits of Western culture. Irrespective of whether the Muslim identity is confounded with cultural baggage or Western values, Hassan believed that this muddling of Islam came at a spiritual cost. He asserted that the Muslim identity must necessarily be established upon the foundation of what a 'real Muslim' is. For Hassan, there cannot be diversity in the expression of the Muslim identity. Thus his evaluation of groups such as Hizb-ul-Tahrir, as described in the previous section, is that "they do good work, but are flawed in their understanding". A perceived objective Muslim identity thus liberated Hassan from the uncertainty embedded in the diversity of Muslim practices found in Copenhagen.

Discussion

Discussions of the need for a perceived 'objective faith' among Western Muslims have recently been reinvigorated (Roy 2004, pg. 25). Our results highlight the socio-political elements underlying the perceived need for objectivity, thereby providing a theoretical link between Peek's (2005) social identity theory and Roy's (2004) sociological analysis of Western Muslims. Although the process of objectification is not unique to any one group, there are several conditions pertaining to Western Muslims that mediate a perceived need for objectivity beyond those outlined above.

The first is the weakening of religious authorities in Western Muslim communities. Religion is deeply intertwined within the cultural landscape of

Muslim majority countries through social and political forms of coercion (Roy 2004, 20). These social and political forms are mediated through local religious scholarship. Upon migration, however, Islam and pre-migratory cultures undergo explicit transformation. The Westernisation process of the Muslim identity involves a transformation from local culturally established norms to a global community disassociated from its ethnic heritage. This weakens the political coercion to practise Islam in a singular manner (although it may persist on the communal level) and diminishes the role and authority of scholars in the sustenance of a religious system.

Secondly, the weakening of social authority runs concurrently with the modernisation of Islam on a global scale (Roy 2004, 158). The internet provides Muslims with an unprecedented level of access to religious texts and knowledge. The break between culture and Islam ushers in a need for direct access to religious texts, which the internet readily provides. Through the process of objectification, the value of formal scholarly training diminishes as knowledge acquisition becomes subordinate role to the feeling of being in touch with truth (Roy 2004, 38). Whereas, previously, there was a verticality inherent within religious teacher–student learning environments, the internet now offers a horizontality in Islamic learning where individuals are simultaneously producers and ingesters of knowledge. Traditional environments are thus replaced with social media platforms where anyone can be a religious authority. This authority is no longer established upon theological qualifications. Rather, it is contingent

on personal qualities such as charisma as well as the ability to satisfy the need to portray Islam in tangible and unambiguous terms. This need, as explained previously, is driven by controversies surrounding Islam (e.g. about the veil, *jihad*) in public discourse, whereby Western Muslims feel compelled to take unequivocal positions. Consequently, the success of online Muslim polemists and their ability to cater to the need for 'perceived objectivity' in quickly digestible sound bites reifies the mentality that Islam and the Muslim identity must be clear-cut in their understanding and formulation.

The study of objectification examines the social and political prerequisites which give rise to an explicit consciousness of the 'Muslim identity' in relation to cultural traditions while taking into consideration the reflexive boundaries within which an objective Muslim identity can be expressed in a given context (Tambar 2012, Pg. 662). Some scholars have referred to the process of Islam's objectification in Western contexts, albeit in other words. Esra Özyürek (2014 Pg.113), for example, referred to the rise of Salafism in Germany as especially alluring due to its anti-ethnic and anti-nationalist emphasis. Salafists reject the blind imitation of Islamic legal schools found in Muslim majority countries. In turn, this rejection produces a break from traditional ethnic forms of being Muslim while advocating a formulation of Islamic practice that is free of cultural bias. Özyürek (2014, pg.114) relates the rise in Salafism to German converts who are attracted to this basic philosophy in view of the prevalent cultural practices of Muslim-born ethnic minorities. Our research, however, underlines that this anti-

ethnic attitude does not belong exclusively to proclaimed Salafists; indeed, none of the participants declared affiliation to Salafism and some were even staunchly opposed to it.

Thus we agree with Roy (2004, pg.80) that the process of objectification is foundational to the entire spectrum of Western Muslim identities, ranging from liberal to neo-fundamentalism, and in fact precedes the rise of Salafist movements in Western countries. The process of objectification extends to Sufism just as it does to Salafism, with deterritorialisation ushering in a cognizance of rituals above and beyond traditions (Raudvere and Stenberg, pg. 5). Anti-ethnic and anti-national sentiments, as well as a perceived need to apprehend a 'true' Islam, arguably also encompass non-practising or non-visible forms of religiosity (Jeldtoft 2011, pg.1147). Thus one should remain cautious about inferring that anti-national, anti-ethnic Muslim youth are *ipso facto* Salafists. Instead, researchers need to remain aware of the socio-political forces implicated in seeking a perceived objective experience of Islam.

Our results are also significant considering contemporary discourses surrounding Muslim radicalisation. The current political understanding of the radicalisation process is person-centric, suggesting that radicalisation hinges upon the psychological vulnerabilities of the individual (Coppock and McGovern 2014, pg. 249). In turn, it is said that radical individuals develop a narrow-minded understanding of Islam—often through the internet—that shuns religious interpretations outside their own frameworks (Johnson 2004, pg. 196).

This is important in the light of our previous discussion of Salafism, which some terrorist experts consider foundational in the development of extremist ideology (Sageman 2004). Our research demonstrates, however, that political—not ideological—elements underlie the necessity of a perceived objective Muslim identity, such as the perceived vilification of Islam in public discourse. This analysis suggests, as Vicki Coppock and Mark McGovern (2014, pg. 246) state, that processes of radicalisation are not entirely products of psychological vulnerabilities, for such a view dismisses the socio-political environments in which radicals develop. Instead, we propose that radicalisation may be considered a by-product of wider political factors which institute a requisite for developing an 'objective' Muslim identity. This suggests that a perceived need for a 'true Islamic experience' does not cause the narrow-minded outlook of Muslim radicals; rather, both develop concurrently as a function of political context. Policy makers should therefore consider the importance of combating Islamophobia in Western countries as an effective means of preventing further radicalisation from developing.

Limitations of our study

Our study has some limitations. Firstly, not all the participants' narratives explicitly articulated a perceived need for objectivity. Some participants, for instance, took pride in the cultural practices of their parents regarding Islam. Prospective research should consider how the process of objectification may be

implicated in ethno-centric expressions of the Muslim identity. Secondly, if the perceived need for an objective Muslim identity is contingent on socio-political contexts, it follows that participants in Denmark, Germany, and Canada—three countries with disparate political relationships with regard to Muslim migrants—should differ according to the unique histories of these countries. At the same time, the consistency in our results, irrespective of the city in which the participants were interviewed, gives credence to Roy's (2004) overarching thesis which examines how the forces of globalisation and deterritorialisation have affected Western Muslims as a whole. Socio-political intricacies are to be expected, however, and prospective research should detail how the perceived need for objectivity varies across socio-political contexts. The same limitation applies to the individual characteristics of the participants, such as ethnicity, gender, race, and migration history. Although our results were consistent despite this variation, prospective research should nonetheless consider these characteristics in the study of objectification.

Conclusion

The evolution of religious identity—from ascribed to chosen—among Western Muslim coincides with a perceived need for objectivity. The basis of this need is, however, as we have explored in this article, partly determined by the socio-political environments in which the Western young Muslim adults have been raised. A fundamental Western orientation favouring the experience of truth,

intensified by perceived attacks on Islam, establishes a precedent for attitudes which disfavour uncertainty and intra-religious diversity. More research is needed to understand how the emphasis on objectivity develops and how young Muslim adults choose some interpretations over others. In addition, prospective research should explore the religious identity development of young Muslim adults whose narratives do not emphasise objectivity. Furthermore, it is unclear how Islam's historical emphasis on knowledge acquisition and socio-political forces interact in the development of this attitude (Rosenthal 1970, pg.240). Research should also consider the relational consequences of young Muslim adults who contest the religious traditions of their families. Finally, research will benefit from developing the concept of identity objectivity upon prior theoretical frameworks of psychological certainty, in which uncertainty is understood to provoke feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and an active search for meaning.

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